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ABSTRACT

The author speaks to the issue of the need in our society to prepare teenage boys and girls to become effective parents. He finds such preparation crucial for the growth and development of the individual infant, and thus is supportive of efforts to ensure that future parents have the skill and understanding to meet the social, emotional, physical and intellectual needs of their youngsters. Changing family life patterns are discussed in relation to the effect they are having on today's children, and statistics are given to illustrate the waning effectiveness of the home in providing a stable environment. The author also addresses the social need for adults who are prepared mentally, physically and emotionally to have children. A list of basic needs for a comprehensive parenthood education program is provided, and a number of federal initiatives designed to meet some of these needs are briefly reviewed. (SJL)

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AN EDUCATOR LOOKS AT PARENTING *

T. H. BELL
U.S. COMMISSIONER OF EDUCATION

IN AT LEAST ONE RESPECT, EDUCATION IS NO DIFFERENT FROM OTHER INSTITUTIONS. IT HAS ITS SHARE OF FADS AND FASHIONS. ON RARE OCCASIONS -- ONCE EVERY FEW YEARS AT BEST -- A WORTHY IDEA ABOUT EDUCATION EMERGES AND CAPTURES THE PUBLIC FANCY TO SUCH AN EXTENT THAT IT BECOMES FAR MORE THAN FAD OR FASHION. IT BECOMES A TRUE EDUCATION MOVEMENT. ALL OF US IN THIS ROOM ARE PARTICIPATING IN SUCH A MOVEMENT, ONE THAT WILL LEAVE A SIGNIFICANT IMPRINT ON AMERICAN EDUCATION.

AS AN EDUCATOR, I CAN THINK OF NOTHING MORE IMPORTANT TO OUR SOCIETY THAN TO PREPARE TEEN-AGE BOYS AND GIRLS TO BECOME EFFECTIVE PARENTS. NOTHING COULD BE MORE CRUCIAL FOR THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE INDIVIDUAL INFANT, OR FOR THE FUTURE OF SOCIETY, THAN TO ASSURE THAT PARENTS HAVE THE SKILL AND UNDERSTANDING TO MEET THE SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, PHYSICAL, AND INTELLECTUAL NEEDS OF THEIR YOUNGSTERS. CHILDREN BROUGHT UP BY SUCH PARENTS WILL HAVE A BETTER OPPORTUNITY TO FULFILL THEIR OWN UNIQUE POTENTIAL AND PARTICIPATE RESPONSIBLY AND MEANINGFULLY IN TOMORROW'S WORLD.

UNFORTUNATELY, IT IS ALL TOO APPARENT THAT, YEAR BY YEAR AND IN INCREASING NUMBERS, AMERICA'S YOUNG PEOPLE ARE ENTERING THE ADULT WORLD INADEQUATELY TRAINED TO BE EFFECTIVE PARENTS.

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A HUNDRED YEARS AGO THE AVERAGE SO-CALLED EXTENDED FAMILY HAD FIVE CHILDREN, AND USUALLY ALL THE CHILDREN HELPED RUN THE HOUSEHOLD. YOUNG PEOPLE DEVELOPED A SENSE OF PERSPECTIVE REGARDING THE DEVELOPMENT OF HUMAN CAPABILITIES AND CAPACITIES THROUGH FIRST-HAND EXPERIENCE WITHIN THE FAMILY SETTING. THEY LEARNED PARENTAL ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES WITHIN THAT SETTING.

TODAY'S NUCLEAR FAMILY AVERAGES ABOUT TWO CHILDREN, AND SOME 9 MILLION CHILDREN ARE BEING RAISED BY ONLY ONE PARENT. THE 9 MILLION ARE MISSING A MODEL FOR THE ABSENT PARENT. THEY ARE DENIED THE EXPERIENCE OF PARTICIPATING IN FAMILY AND PARENTAL TEAMWORK. A GOOD PERCENTAGE OF THEM ALSO ARE WITHOUT BROTHERS AND SISTERS, FURTHER REDUCING THEIR OPPORTUNITIES TO LEARN.

TO A GREAT EXTENT, THE NUCLEAR FAMILY KNOWS A LIFESTYLE BEST CHARACTERIZED AS HARRIED, FRAGMENTED, AND ISOLATED. IT DOES NOT KNOW THE GIVE AND TAKE OF FAMILY RESPONSIBILITIES AND SHARING, OR THE KNOWLEDGE AND WISDOM THAT USED TO BE TRANSMITTED BY ELDERS.

THE CHALLENGE OF TEACHING YOUNG ADULTS HOW TO BE EFFECTIVE PARENTS IS OF COURSE NOT CONFINED TO THE EDUCATION ESTABLISHMENT. NEVERTHELESS, MORE AND MORE OF THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR HELPING OUR YOUNG PEOPLE BECOME GOOD PARENTS SEEMS TO BE FALLING ON THE SHOULDERS OF PROFESSIONAL EDUCATORS. THAT IS WHY WE IN THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION FOLLOW WITH GREAT INTEREST AND SUPPORT THE PARENTING CONCEPT ADVOCATED BY THE NATIONAL CONGRESS OF PARENTS

AND TEACHERS AND THE NATIONAL FOUNDATION-MARCH OF DIMES. MOST WHOLEHEARTEDLY DO I SUPPORT YOUR OBJECTIVE OF MAKING EDUCATION FOR PARENTHOOD A PART OF THE HIGH SCHOOL CURRICULUM.

YOUR TWO GROUPS HAVE BEEN IN THE VANGUARD OF THE MOVEMENT TO SEE THAT YOUNG PARENTS KNOW HOW TO BE EFFECTIVE PARENTS. IT WAS ONLY FOUR YEARS AGO THAT YOU AGREED ON THE NEED TO MAKE PARENTING AN INTEGRAL PART OF THE CURRICULUM AND JOINED FORCES IN A MUTUAL EFFORT TO MAKE THE IDEA A REALITY. I UNDERSTAND THAT THIS IS THE 11TH PARENTING CONFERENCE SINCE THAT LANDMARK AGREEMENT AND THAT IT IS ALSO YOUR BIGGEST. I UNDERSTAND YOUR TWO ORGANIZATIONS EXPECT TO COMPLETE THE CONFERENCE SERIES WITHIN A YEAR, WHEN IT WILL HAVE COVERED THE CONTINENTAL UNITED STATES AND ALASKA. I HOPE YOU WILL BE AS SUCCESSFUL IN THIS EFFORT AS YOU WERE IN YOUR JOINT ENDEAVOR TO WIPE OUT POLIO BY PROMOTING THE USE OF SALK VACCINE AMONG SCHOOL CHILDREN. CERTAINLY I HOPE YOU NEVER EASE YOUR EFFORTS TO GENERATE ENTHUSIASM AND SUPPORT FOR PARENTING EDUCATION.

I AM SURE THAT, AS AN EDUCATOR, I AM NOT ALONE IN BELIEVING THAT STABILITY OF THE HOME IS ESSENTIAL FOR THE PROPER CARE AND NURTURING OF INFANTS AND YOUNG CHILDREN. PARENTS ARE A CHILD'S FIRST TEACHERS, AND WHAT IS DONE BY THE FAMILY IN THE HOME ENVIRONMENT HAS A FAR GREATER INFLUENCE ON CHILDREN THAN ANYTHING A SCHOOL CAN DO OR UNDO. YET AN ESTIMATED 60 PERCENT

OF THE PRE-SCHOOL AGE CHILDREN IN THE UNITED STATES ARE HAULED OFF EVERY MORNING TO A DAY-CARE CENTER, A HOME DAY-CARE SERVICE, OR THE HOME OF A SURROGATE MOTHER BABYSITTER. THIS ENABLES BOTH PARENTS TO HUSTLE OFF TO A JOB SO THAT, WITH TWO INCOMES, THE FAMILY CAN KEEP UP WITH THE FAST PACE AND SOMEWHAT MISPLACED VALUES TOO OFTEN FOUND IN TODAY'S WAY OF LIFE.

STARK STATISTICS ILLUSTRATE THE WANING EFFECTIVENESS OF THE HOME AND POINT TO THE CRYING NEED FOR PARENTING PROGRAMS . . .

ONE OUT OF FIVE CHILDREN FROM 14 TO 17 YEARS OF AGE LIVES IN A ONE-PARENT HOME.

THREE OUT OF FOUR TEEN-AGE MARRIAGES END IN DIVORCE.

ONE OF EVERY 10 SEVENTEEN-YEAR-OLD GIRLS IN THE UNITED STATES IS A MOTHER, AND 16 PERCENT OF THESE GIRLS HAVE AT LEAST TWO CHILDREN.

AN ESTIMATED 210,000 SCHOOL-AGE GIRLS UNDER 18 GIVE BIRTH IN A YEAR, AND 85 PERCENT OF THEM KEEP THEIR CHILD TO RAISE.

EVEN IF WE OVERLOOKED THESE STRIKING STATISTICS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS, AND EVEN IF THE IDEAL OF THE CLOSE-KNIT, TRADITIONAL FAMILY WERE THE NORM IN TODAY'S SOCIETY, CONSTANTLY EMERGING NEW KNOWLEDGE AND TECHNOLOGY WOULD MAKE PARENTING EDUCATION ESSENTIAL. TAKE THE FIELD OF NUTRITION, WHICH IS SO CLOSE TO THE HEART OF THE NATIONAL FOUNDATION-MARCH OF DIMES.

EVERY DAY WE ARE GAINING NEW INSIGHTS AS TO WHAT CONSTITUTES SOUND NUTRITION, DIET, AND HEALTH BEFORE CONCEPTION AND DURING PREGNANCY. THE COURIER, A MAGAZINE PUBLISHED MONTHLY BY UNESCO IN 15 LANGUAGES, DEVOTED ITS ENTIRE JANUARY ISSUE TO THE BRAIN. ONE ARTICLE MAKES THE FOLLOWING POINTS CONCERNING NUTRITION:

WHILE THE GREATEST RATE OF BRAIN GROWTH IN HUMANS OCCURS BEFORE BIRTH, BRAIN WEIGHT TRIPLES IN THE FIRST YEAR OF LIFE. THIS IS A RATE NOT SHARED BY ANY OTHER MAMMAL, AND IT GIVES A CLUE TO THE IMPORTANT ROLE THAT NUTRITION MUST PLAY DURING THIS EARLY PERIOD.

MALNOURISHED MOTHERS PRODUCE SMALLER AND LIGHTER PLACENTAS THAN ADEQUATELY FED MOTHERS. NEWBORN ANIMALS FROM DEFICIENT PLACENTAS HAVE FEWER BRAIN CELLS.

FEMALE RATS BORN TO MALNOURISHED MOTHERS DO NOT PRODUCE ADEQUATE PLACENTAS, EVEN IF THEY THEMSELVES ARE WELL-NOURISHED DURING THEIR ENTIRE LIFE. THEIR OFFSPRING ALSO EXHIBIT THE CLASSIC EVIDENCES OF MALNUTRITION.

A STUDY OF 502 CANDADIAN CHILDREN SHOWED THAT THOSE WITH LOW BIRTH WEIGHT CONSISTENTLY SCORED LOWER IN I.Q. TESTS THAN NORMAL CHILDREN. AND NO MATTER HOW WELL THEY WERE FED IN LATER YEARS, THOSE BORN SMALL AT TERM, OR PREMATURELY, DID NOT REACH THEIR FULL BIOLOGICAL POTENTIAL.

SEVERITY OF MENTAL DIFFICULTIES RISES STRIKINGLY WITH DECREASING BIRTH WEIGHT. INVESTIGATORS IN SCOTLAND FOUND THAT FEWER THAN ONE PERCENT OF NORMAL BIRTH WEIGHT CHILDREN EXHIBIT MENTAL DEFICIENCIES, BUT THAT 54 PERCENT OF CHILDREN WHOSE BIRTH WEIGHT WAS 1.36 KILOGRAMS (APPROXIMATELY THREE POUNDS) OR LESS DO HAVE SUCH PROBLEMS.

THE CHALLENGE EVIDENT IN THESE FINDINGS IS NOT ONLY TO ASSURE THAT CHILDREN WILL NOT BE SHORT-CHANGED BY IMPROPER OR INADEQUATE NUTRITION. IT IS TO ASSURE, ALSO, THAT ADULTS ARE PREPARED MENTALLY, PHYSICALLY, AND EMOTIONALLY TO HAVE CHILDREN. PARENTS MUST BE ABLE TO PROVIDE THE LOVE AND UNDERSTANDING NEEDED TO ENABLE INFANTS TO GROW INTO FULL FLOWER. FROM AN EDUCATOR'S POINT OF VIEW, THE TASK OF THE SCHOOLS IS TO ASSURE THAT ADOLESCENTS AND ADULTS HAVE THE EDUCATION THEY NEED TO RAISE HEALTHY, PRODUCTIVE CHILDREN.

PARENTING EDUCATION MUST BE NOT ONLY AVAILABLE BUT ALSO RELEVANT AND INTERESTING. SCHOOLS CAN PROVIDE THE INFORMATION YOUNG PEOPLE NEED TO MAKE AN INTELLIGENT CHOICE AS TO WHETHER TO BE A PARENT, WHEN TO BE A PARENT, AND HOW OFTEN. CERTAINLY SCHOOLS CAN GIVE YOUNG PEOPLE THE KNOWLEDGE ABOUT HEREDITARY DISORDERS, BLOOD INCOMPATIBILITIES, AND GENETIC AND CHROMOSOMAL DISORDERS THAT MAY INFLUENCE THEIR DECISION. MOST CERTAINLY TOO, THE SCHOOL CAN POINT OUT THE IMPORTANCE OF THE NUTRITION OF THE MOTHER TO AN UNBORN CHILD'S ULTIMATE PHYSICAL AND INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT.

THERE HAVE BEEN SOME FRIGHTENING REPORTS OF UNREALISTIC EXPECTATIONS OF YOUNG PARENTS AS TO WHAT COULD BE EXPECTED OF THEIR INFANTS AT VARIOUS STAGES OF GROWTH. EDUCATION CAN HELP REDUCE FRUSTRATION -- POSSIBLY EVEN CHILD ABUSE -- BY POINTING OUT WHAT IS REASONABLE TO EXPECT OF CHILDREN AT VARIOUS STAGES OF DEVELOPMENT.

I AM CONVINCED THAT THE FIRST FIVE YEARS ARE THE MOST CRUCIAL TO THE INTELLECTUAL DEVELOPMENT OF EACH INDIVIDUAL. PUBLIC EDUCATION CAN HELP EQUIP PARENTS WITH THE KINDS OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILL REQUIRED TO MAXIMIZE THE INTELLECTUAL GROWTH OF THEIR PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN. WE CAN TEACH TECHNIQUES TO OBSERVE AND ANALYZE CHILD BEHAVIOR AND WAYS TO COMMUNICATE WITH YOUNG CHILDREN.

EVERY LOCAL COMMUNITY MUST DETERMINE THE PRIORITIES OF CONTENT, SEQUENCE, AND EMPHASIS OF ITS OWN EDUCATION FOR PARENTHOOD PROGRAM, BUT I WOULD LIKE TO SUGGEST THAT A COMPREHENSIVE PARENTHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAM BE DEVELOPED AND EXPANDED FROM THE FOLLOWING BASIC LIST:

. . . HOW TO TEACH CHILDREN INCIDENTALLY IN THE HOME

. . . HOW TO BUILD COGNITIVE POWER THROUGH HOME-BASED PRE-SCHOOL EDUCATION

. . . BIOLOGICAL FACTORS OF REPRODUCTION

. . . PREGNANCY, PRE-NATAL DEVELOPMENT, AND CHILDBIRTH

. . . PRE-NATAL AND POST-NATAL CARE FOR MOTHERS

. . . INFANT CARE

. . . CHILD GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT

. . . THE HANDICAPPED CHILD

. . . CREATIVE ACTIVITIES FOR CHILDREN

. . . FAMILY STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION

. . . PARENTAL ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

. . . FAMILY PLANNING

. . . COMMUNITY RESOURCES TO AID IN PARENTING

A NUMBER OF FEDERAL INITIATIVES NOW UNDER WAY ARE DESIGNED TO HELP ACCOMPLISH SOME OF THE SUGGESTIONS I HAVE MADE. LET ME TOUCH ON SOME OF THEM BRIEFLY. . .

THE OFFICE OF EDUCATION, THE OFFICE OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT, AND THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF MENTAL HEALTH, ALL OF WHICH ARE AGENCIES OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND WELFARE, HAVE LAUNCHED A PROGRAM CALLED EDUCATION FOR PARENTHOOD. IT SEEKS TO INCREASE THE AWARENESS OF ADOLESCENTS OF THE NEEDS OF CHILDREN AND EMPHASIZES THE ROLE OF PARENTS IN FOSTERING A CHILD'S DEVELOPMENT.

A MAJOR PROJECT UNDER THE EDUCATION FOR PARENTHOOD UMBRELLA IS "EXPLORING CHILDHOOD," WHICH IS THE DEVELOPMENT AND DISSEMINATION OF A CURRICULUM FOR ADOLESCENTS.

THE EXPLORING CHILDHOOD PROJECT CALLS FOR ADOLESCENT STUDENTS TO GET ACTUAL PRACTICAL EXPERIENCE IN WORKING WITH THE YOUNG. SCHOOLS USING THIS FLEXIBLE CURRICULUM HAVE CLOSE TIES WITH DAY-CARE CENTERS, HEAD START PROJECTS, NURSERY SCHOOLS, AND OTHER PLACES WHERE PRE-SCHOOLERS AND INFANTS ARE FOUND. EXPLORING CHILDHOOD IS A ONE-YEAR ELECTIVE COURSE HIGHLY ADAPTABLE TO THE VARYING NEEDS OF ADOLESCENTS OF DIFFERENT BACKGROUNDS. IN ITS FIRST YEAR AND A HALF OF OPERATION IT HAS INVOLVED 600 TEACHERS, 8,000 JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS, AND 23,000 PRE-SCHOOL CHILDREN.

ANOTHER MAJOR PROJECT IS A PROGRAM OF GRANTS TO SEVEN NATIONAL VOLUNTARY YOUTH-SERVING ORGANIZATIONS. THE SEVEN ORGANIZATIONS, WHICH INCLUDE THE SALVATION ARMY AND THE BOY AND GIRL SCOUTS, HAVE DESIGNED THEIR OWN APPROACHES TO PARENTHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS AND ARE CONDUCTING THEM OUTSIDE OF THE SCHOOLS.

WE ARE ALSO PUBLISHING A BOOKLET DESCRIBING 15 SUCCESSFUL PARENTHOOD EDUCATION PROGRAMS. AND THIS PAST JANUARY WE CO-SPONSORED WITH THE OFFICE OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT A THREE-DAY MEETING FOR PARENTHOOD CURRICULUM MATERIAL PRODUCERS, SOME OF THEM RECEIVING OFFICE OF EDUCATION OR OTHER FEDERAL FUNDS, OTHERS INDEPENDENT OF SUCH FUNDING.

In conclusion, let me reiterate that all parents deserve the opportunity to learn how to enrich life for their children in every way -- emotionally, intellectually, physically, socially. Public education should make this opportunity available for all.

The role of Parent-Teacher Associations is of critical importance. With their intimate knowledge of their community, members of PTAs are in a splendid position to tap and pull together the diverse talents and resources which are so essential in planning a balanced parenthood curriculum tailored to each community's particular needs.

We in the Office of Education have parenting education high on our agenda. I look upon our joint endeavor -- yours and ours -- as dedicated to strengthening family ties and furthering the cause of education in the home and the school.

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